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SOME PRINCIPLES OF NOMENCLATURE

BY W J MCGEE

I

Many of our common family names, or surnames, such as Smith and Carpenter, Hunter and Weaver, stand for occupations ; others suggest personal characteristics, such as White and Brown for complexion, Small and Long for stature, Good and Meek for disposition ; still others suggest place or condition of residence, such as Seaman and Hillman, Warman and McGee (Mac Eagh, or Child of the Mist). Many other family names represent either surnames or prenames with diminutives added ; and these derived names may either indicate paternity, like Smithson and McDonald, Johnson and Fitzgerald, or they may stand simply as undefined diminutives, such as Smithie, Wilcox, and Peterkin ; and the diminutives may be either prefixed as in O'Neil and Aphorp, or suffixed as in Clarkson and Wilcox. Many of our family names are derived from other tongues in which similar meanings may be found ; and in yet other cases meanings are not at first apparent, yet are ascertainable if traced backwards through successive generations to the days when language was less definite than now and when every man was a law unto himself in matters of orthography and pronunciation. Thus most family names are found to have meanings, but the meaning is seldom recognized, and would commonly convey a false impression if it were.

In like manner certain prenames stand for character or condition, like Peter (rock) and Theophilus (god-beloved), though in most cases the signification is doubtful or completely lost ; but analogy with the later-developed surnames and inference from the known meaning of certain prenames, either in the English or other languages, alike indicate that all such names originally carried associated meanings, and were indeed applied to express personal characteristics or other ideas connected with

the individuals, just as is the case among those savages who have risen to the plane of applying names to persons and things.

Similarly a part of our geographic names, like Blue ridge, Long island, Rocky mountains, and Lake Superior, express ideas associated with the features to which they are applied; yet many of the names of our rivers, lakes, and mountains are of aboriginal derivation, and while they conveyed poetic or prosaic meanings to the Red Men, are meaningless to us. So, too, in the older countries many names of places were originally common nouns, as indicated by the modern meaning (*e. g.*, Norfolk and Cambridge), by the retention of articles (*e. g.*, Le Havre and La Haye—Havre and The Hague in English), or by more obscure relations brought to light through antiquarian research. Thus, inference from known cases and analogy with family nomenclature and with the proper names of primitive peoples all indicate that geographic designations originally conveyed associated meanings; and this conclusion is in no way weakened by the fact that in most cases the original meanings are lost.

Accordingly, examination of the proper names applied to persons and places in this and other countries during the last three or five centuries indicates (1) That proper names originally expressed ideas collateral to or associated with the person or place named; (2) That as time passed these collateral or associated meanings were lost; and (3) That concurrently with the loss of the original by-meanings there has grown up a system of applying and using proper names as simple designations of, or labels for, the persons and things named. This differentiation in nomenclature has been effected within a few generations, and was evidently not only unforeseen but strongly opposed at every step by the tendency to apply names of associated meaning to new-born persons and newly discovered places—a tendency commonly failing only when invading races accepted names current among the conquered peoples, which, being of strange tongues, carried no associated meaning.

These conclusions concerning the evolution of place names are in harmony with the evolution of language as expounded by Whitney, Sayce, Powell, Mallery, and other scientific linguists. In the beginning certain ideas were doubtless conveyed by signs, as they are in some measure among the lower animals; and as ideas multiplied, the signs, whether movements, gestures, or

postures, increased in number until the sign once standing for a group of ideas was differentiated into a group of signs, each more or less definitely expressing its own idea. So, too, it is certain that in the primitive vocal language words were few, and while each represented perhaps a fairly definite central idea, ill-differentiated by-meanings also clung about it; and that as time passed, new words were invented or evolved to express the associated meanings, and thus the original words gradually became definite. In like manner the primitive written language was pictographic and represented animals, plants, and other objects to which associated meanings clung; but as the mind of man expanded the pictographs were replaced by symbols or ideographs, which expressed ideas directly rather than by association; and still later the more or less fanciful ideographs were pruned and molded into purely arbitrary characters expressing ideas only by combination—the process throughout representing change from a multiplicity of meanings toward simplicity. The general process of evolution in language, vocal and written, continues today, and nearly all of its stages are recorded in contemporary history of different peoples as well as in classic writings. Thus, there is a stage in the development of definite language in which more or less obscure by-meanings cling to words, and this is the stage of mysticism or dialectics, or esoteric ideation, from which we are not yet completely emancipated; and there is another stage in which by-meanings are expressed through modification of primary terms by inflection and by combination of elements, this being the stage of grammatic differentiation from which only the English language is at all emancipated. It is to be observed, however, that the tendency of the times is toward the elimination of complexities of both sorts and toward the abandonment of the more complex languages; and this would appear to be a reason for the ascendancy of the simple, tangible, and definite tongue and writing of the Anglo-Saxon. Possibly the Anglo-Saxon blood is more potent than that of other races; but it is to be remembered that the Anglo-Saxon language is the simplest, the most perfectly and simply symbolic, that the world has ever seen, and that by means of it the Anglo-Saxon saves his vitality for conquest instead of wasting it under the Juggernaut of a cumbrous mechanism for conveying thought. Accordingly, on tracing the evolution of language,

it appears that signs, words, and symbols followed the course of late pursued by proper names ; at first the expressions covered a multitude of meanings, but the by-meanings have gradually fallen away until the principal linguistic elements have come to stand for simple dissociated ideas.

II

The evolution of nomenclature has now reached a stage in which it is not only possible but needful to discriminate two classes of proper names : The first or primitive class includes those having collateral or associated meanings, and may be called connotative or *connotive* ; the second class embraces simple designations without collateral or associated meanings, and may be called denotative or *denotive*.

Placing these classes in the order of their development, it is found that the connotive names are ancient, the denotive names modern. During earlier centuries nearly all place-names, as well as most surnames and many prenames of people, were connotive, while today, and particularly in this country, most place-names and nearly all person-names are practically denotive ; for even when an etymologic or ethnologic or antiquarian meaning clings to a name this by-meaning conveys no impression to ordinary users of the term ; Mr Miller is a man, tall or short, rich or poor, merchant prince or county pauper, as may happen, but neither the owner nor the driver of a mill ; and Harpers Ferry is a village or town, large or small, refined or rude, but never a strumming musician or a ferry. The forefathers infused their own individuality and that of their neighbors into their proper names, and thus developed an anthropomorphic nomenclature ; but their busier descendants will have none of it.

Yet, while in general connotive names have given place to denotive names, there is a noteworthy exception to this tendency of the times. In the cities of two centuries ago the street names were given in commemoration of men, trees, birds, streams and the like, and bore no relation to each other, while the houses were designated by their owners or by fanciful names ; but in this century city houses have come to be designated by numbers and, particularly in this country, the streets receive names or other designations designed to indicate their relation. So the

modern city nomenclature is connotive rather than denotive. It is to be observed, however, that this development of denotive nomenclature is not a reversal to the primitive condition, since the by-meanings are not accidental but designed, not random but systemic, and adapted to a definite end. In brief, the general tendency in the evolution of place-names is in the direction of denotive designations for independent units, and in the direction of connotive designations for interdependent parts.

The extended and vigorous growth of systemic place-names and person-names during the last five centuries is a striking feature of our civilization and is worthy of careful consideration. Its cause would appear to be simple. As energy takes the path of least resistance, so the mind seeks to encompass its end with the minimum expenditure of energy ; and thus it happens that men refuse, albeit unconsciously, to employ a complex idea when a simple one will do, and eventually fall into the habit of not only expressing themselves, but even thinking, in the most economical ways. Now, the idea conveyed by a connotive name is complex, while the idea conveyed by the denotive name is simple ; the one is a more or less elaborate impression, the other a single definite mark ; the one a pictograph or hieroglyph, the other a simple arbitrary symbol. So, however strongly sentiment may cling to the complex connotive meaning, economy of energy leads gradually, through instinct rather than definite consciousness, to the simplification of the idea, until finally it is intuitively stored, used, and conveyed in its most economic form. Hence economy in thought and utterance would seem to be the key-note to the evolution of proper names. It is to be observed that the same cause will explain the growth of language in general from the associative to the dissociative forms ; for it is economy (including much more than the " laziness " of Sayce) that forms the key-note to linguistic evolution.

III

The function of science is three-fold : (1) to discover that which is ; (2) to ascertain that which was in terms of that which is now ; and (3) to find courses of action in that which is and that which was, and thus to determine what is to be. Accordingly, the astronomer first observes the positions of the cosmic

bodies, next compares these positions with those observed by his forefathers and thus obtains a measure of cosmic movement, and then determines eclipses and conjunctions and occultations for decades in the future, and all modern ships are guided by his predictions. In like manner the chemist first ascertains the properties of a substance in a given form, next examines it under other forms and compares its different forms, and is then able to formulate laws of chemic action and predict changes going on with changed conditions to the extent that modern industries and household economy are based on his predictions. To a less degree the same order is pursued in the biotic sciences, though vital phenomena are more complex, so that prediction is less certain ; yet the breeding of stock represents observation, comparison of stages, and prevision, so that domesticated animals and fowls represent in some measure the outcome of biotic prediction. The anthropologist has to deal not only with the animal body, but with the still more elusive and complex mind, so that his methods and results are still less exact than those of the biologist ; yet even the student of man and his institutions profits greatly by the scientific method so useful in the ancillary branches of knowledge.

Now, when the scientific method is applied to personal and geographic names, it is first found that some names have associated meanings and others not ; next, on comparing the present with the past, it is found that the meanings associated with certain names are constantly disappearing, and with further study that the by-meanings disappear through an instinctive tendency toward economy of thought and expression ; and accordingly it is easy to predict that denotive names must come to prevail over connotive names. The principles thus suggested must guide the application and use of personal and geographic names ; they will not indeed be recognized by all individuals, many of whom will employ the primitive method of giving more or less complex connotive names ; but in the end economy of thought and expression in the hundred or thousand will outweigh the whim of the one, and thus the work of the obstructionist will come to nought, however strongly it be guarded—the child loves to remember that two apples and two apples are four apples, but the busy adult soon comes to remember only that $2 + 2 = 4$. The principles indeed will govern nomenclature, whether they are

recognized or not, in the future as in the past; they represent a law of nature which it were folly to oppose.

On applying these principles to the subject of American geographic nomenclature, a significant fact appears: Many of our rivers and mountains and some of our cities and towns bear aboriginal names. Now, while these names bore a meaning to the Red Man, and while in some cases the ethnologist or antiquary is able to interpret them, they are meaningless to the vast majority of people. Thus they are typical denotive terms. Moreover, a characteristic of the American people is directness of method in thought and expression; and in this way denotive nomenclature has been stimulated more than in other countries. For both of these reasons our American geographic nomenclature is largely denotive and to only a limited extent connotive; and since the denotive form is the higher in the evolution of proper names, it follows that our geographic nomenclature is superior to that of any other nation. And for this nomenclature we are indebted to the Red Men, whose homes we have despoiled and whose lands we have confiscated, and sentiment argues the rearing of a monument to a passing race by retaining the original names wherever possible. Be it remembered, too, that the retention of such names is but the extension of that denotive nomenclature which makes for further weal by simplifying thought—for it is not enough to say that Americans seek denotive nomenclature because of our national directness of method; here as elsewhere in nature tendencies are cumulative, and mental directness is increased and progress gained by reason of the simpler nomenclature.

Many local applications of the principles of nomenclature might be made, and some of these are worth stating. The best names for hills, valleys, rivers, and towns are denotive, since these features are not related, and since therefore the independent designation is the most economical. But streets and avenues, squares and houses, are parts of a unit and stand in relations to other parts which it is commonly economical to express. It is for this reason that while older cities gave unrelated designations to streets and houses, modern cities apply connotive street names and connotive house numbers. This is particularly true in America, where national characteristics have so largely led to the conscious or unconscious development of economic

methods; and it is especially noteworthy in the more modern cities. The simplest and thus the best application of the connotive method in street designation is found in numbering streets; another application is found in lettering them, and the perfection of street designation along two different but related lines is found in Washington, where the streets are numbered one way and lettered the other, and in Salt Lake City, where the streets are numbered both ways. Less desirable applications of the connotive method are found in the designation of streets by names of related meaning, whose initials are arranged alphabetically, so as to indicate their position with respect to a starting point. An excellent example of this method is found in certain suburbs of Washington, where streets take the names of American cities—Albany, Boston, Cincinnati, etc. Similarly streets may be designated by the names of trees arranged alphabetically—Aspen, Beech, Chestnut, etc.,—or by the names of rivers—Atchafalaya, Brandywine, Colorado, etc. It is to be remembered, however, that use of names of cities, trees, or rivers in this way represents a return toward the primitive connotive nomenclature, which has been tried in the crucible of time and found bad; it is a reversal of normal development, a social atavism, and it is too much to hope that the arrangement will serve any other useful purpose than that of permitting repetition of the alphabet without danger of confusion. Another application of the connotive method by means of the alphabet is found in the use of names of celebrities arranged alphabetically; but this method is not only bootless, except for permitting the use of the alphabet in a distinctive way, but is perhaps objectionable in that it tends to degrade honored names without commemorating individuals—for Washington market, Jefferson place, and Adams street are but labels, and not one in ten who use them is reminded thereby of the founders of the nation, and many there are who never know their meaning. Viewed in the light of the evolution of proper names, the system of numbering streets and houses is the best that can possibly be devised, and next in excellence is the system of lettering streets; and any departure from these systems is a step backward.